

Interview With Adm. Mike Mullen
Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff
on the Tavis Smiley Show
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TAVIS SMILEY: Admiral Michael Mullen is the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Of course, his previous positions included chief of naval operations for the U.S. His decorated military career includes honors such as the Legion of Merit and the Defense Distinguished Service Medal.

Admiral Mullen, nice to have you on the program.

ADM. MICHAEL MULLEN: Thanks, Tavis. It's great to be with you.

SMILEY: A rare pleasure for us to have you on the West Coast, even though you're from Los Angeles.

MULLEN: I am, and actually I've been out here a couple of days and it's nice to be back home.

SMILEY: We're honored to have you on the program while you're back home.

MULLEN: Thanks.

SMILEY: So much to talk about and so little time. Let me just start throwing things at you if I can.

MULLEN: Sure.

SMILEY: I'll start with Pakistan. You were just there recently. I don't even know where to begin. You tell me your take on what has gone wrong. What's happening as we speak in Pakistan?

MULLEN: I was there actually this week. I came out Wednesday, and really I worked hard since last February with the new chief of staff of the Army. He's been in that job about one year and

he's the most significant military member of the Pakistani military. And I've worked hard with him, and actually throughout my life, to have strong engagements with military leaders. He's an important guy, so I spent a lot of time doing that: one, trying to understand what's going on there; two, to work with him in this real challenge that we both have. He's got a significant insurgent terrorist problem in his country as exemplified just over the weekend by that tragic bombing which occurred.

We've got in the FATA there on the border of Pakistan, insurgents are coming across that border because they have a freedom to roam inside the FATA and they're killing American soldiers and coalition soldiers in Afghanistan. And that's also a place where al Qaeda resides and still plots against us in the West, specifically to our homeland. So I'm working with him as much as I can to figure out what's the best way to get at that.

SMILEY: There's all kind of speculation about the reason behind this bombing last weekend. We don't have time to walk through all of them.

MULLEN: Sure.

SMILEY: But one of the speculations, as I'm sure you know, is that it may have been some retaliation for these ground operations that we've had inside of Pakistan that we learned about a couple of weeks ago. Your take on that?

MULLEN: Well, I'm not going to talk about any detailed operations per se. I haven't seen anything which really pins down the reason for that. I think it is more representative of the threat that's there. The Pakistani people have really suffered under the suicide bombings in particular this year where up around 600 citizens who've lost their life over there. And in my visits there, and I've been there five times since February, and it's very clear to me that the leadership – military, civilian – understand they have a pretty severe problem. And I think it's more specifically related to that, and the exact reasons for it, that's not really pinned down.

SMILEY: Is there reason for the American people to believe that things are going to get better there before – get worse there, rather, before they get better? And I ask that against the backdrop of the fact that you know as well as I do that many of the persons who we suspect are behind these kinds of bombings are not fans of the new president, the widower of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto.

MULLEN: Sure.

SMILEY: So if this guy is now in power as the new president, why should we believe that this is not going to get worse before it gets better inside the country?

MULLEN: Well, I think one of the challenges that Pakistan's had is this political transition, clearly, over these many months. So newly elected president, democratic country, very committed to getting at this terrorist threat and recognizing he's got other challenges as well, not the least of which is severe economic challenges, but very focused on this threat, so – and

recognizing – and I think it's too soon to say whether things will get worse. And I wouldn't want to predict in that regard.

I do think it's important that it be addressed and I know the leadership in Pakistan is committed to addressing that.

SMILEY: What's happening in Afghanistan, because these two things are inextricably linked, I think?

MULLEN: They are inextricably linked, and more so than I've certainly seen. And when I talk about Afghanistan and talk about Pakistan I really do try to talk about both of them because I think – and it goes back historically, but it's very evident to us that over there in Afghanistan right now fighting this war that the freedom to maneuver that exists in this FATA area is something that's providing an opportunity for insurgents to come across and really wreak havoc with our forces.

Violence is up in Afghanistan. The insurgency is more sophisticated this year than it was last year, than it was a year before that. So the trends in that regard are not good and they really do have to be addressed. Our ability to work with the Pakistanis from Afghanistan as they work on the other side to squeeze this border is a really important step.

SMILEY: I remember actually when you offered this testimony before Congress, you of course made a lot of news when you said before Congress – I'm paraphrasing here – that I don't think we're winning in Afghanistan, but I think we can win in Afghanistan.

MULLEN: Right.

SMILEY: You said that before Congress. I ask now, interestingly, whether or not you still feel that way. Have we won in Afghanistan? Are we winning in Afghanistan now? Can we win in Afghanistan?

MULLEN: Well, I think we can clearly. That statement – I only made that a little over a week ago, so not much has changed with respect to that. I'm increasingly concerned about the trends in Afghanistan, the level of violence. But it's not just about security. It's about providing opportunities for, in the end, the Afghan people and a secure environment. But there's a governance piece of this, there's a rule of law piece of this, there's an economic piece of it.

I think one the real challenges in Afghanistan is that it's a very poor country, somewhere around the bottom five in the world, and there's a development piece of this which has to come in behind the security. We haven't had enough forces there to be able to provide the security in a way that we could sustain it. It's what we've learned in Iraq, which is clear an area, hold an area, and then build an area. The commanders on the ground have indicated they need more forces there. The president made a decision very recently to send more forces to Afghanistan. We still have a request for more forces even beyond that. And that's going to be an important step as well. But it's all three of these – I call it a three-legged stool – all three of those things have to be working in the right direction.

SMILEY: Speaking of the three-legged stool, how do – not how do, how should the American people take your statement now as the chairman of the Joint Chiefs that we can win Afghanistan as opposed to we have already won? Because the American people thought this was over with. We left one country, basically ran to another, and now this thing has come back to bite us in the behind again. How did this happen?

MULLEN: Well, I think it – clearly the safe haven that existed there for al Qaeda has moved to Pakistan. And then they've had a freedom of maneuver there, and actually it's a combination of both those from al Qaeda as well as the Taliban. And because of that safe haven, the insurgency is growing again. And so what happened in 2002 when we first went in there in ways with respect to the Taliban is reoccurring. And it's important for us to focus on it.

We've had a heavy focus on Iraq, clearly, for the last several years. What has happened, I believe, in the country, and actually internationally, is there's been more focus on Afghanistan in the last year, and I think that illuminates what's really going on there, and then it gets leaders in countries engaged in ways that really requires us to focus to get at the challenge.

One of the things that's going on also is the growth of the poppy crop, and that's up dramatically from 2002. The profits from that feed the insurgency directly. They're going straight to the Taliban, and that connection to the insurgency is very direct. And they're the ones that are killing our young men and women and I think that has to be addressed as well.

SMILEY: Let me ask you a question very forthright and direct before I move to Iraq. What did we – that is to say, the U.S. military – do wrong in Afghanistan for you and me to be still talking about this in 2008? What did we do wrong?

MULLEN: Well, I'm not sure I'd lay it out as what we did wrong. Clearly we went there first. The priority, clearly just by allocation of forces and focus has been Iraq for these last several years. We've had some growing challenges with respect to Afghanistan and we've recognized that. And I think that, as I said, not just do I not think we're winning, but I think can. I think we can. The results from Afghanistan are actually mixed.

Where we do have – where we've had Marines, we've added Marines – actually, we've added about 10,000 forces in the last year or so. Some of those are Marines and they've had a significant impact this year. Where we've been in engagement with the insurgents, we've actually defeated them. So the results are mixed and the trends aren't good, which is why I think we really have to continue to focus and look for ways to get more forces there as quickly as we can. Not just the United States, because I think there are 42 countries in Afghanistan, many of those NATO countries, and we've all got to focus on this.

SMILEY: Tell me more about the drawdown in Iraq, what we expect to happen there.

MULLEN: It's – we've been saying, all of us in military leadership positions and actually up to civilian leaderships, have said for the last certainly significant period of time that it depends on conditions on the ground. I was just there last week, just before I was in Pakistan and conditions there are much better. And it's a result of the surge. There is security. Violence is way down. In

fact, I saw a note today from General Odierno, who relieved General Petraeus at the change of command last week, that in the last 24 hours there were no Iraqis killed, and that's a first time since the war started where there was a 24-hour period where there wasn't someone that was killed.

But the overall trends there are going in the right direction. Al Qaeda is still there. They're very much on the run. The – I think the description that we use now is while the improvements in the overall conditions are fragile and they're not irreversible yet, there's a durability there that wasn't there a few months ago. The surge made a huge difference, but it's also been the economy starting to go. There's been political reconciliation. So it's all three pieces which have started to work together.

So we're not – we're clearly not out of the woods with respect to Iraq, but conditions on the ground have allowed us to have, in my recommendations to the secretary of defense and also the president, to start to reduce forces and he has started to do that.

SMILEY: Speaking of your recommendations, and I don't mean to make you political, not that you would let me do that anyway, but since we are in the midst of a presidential campaign, McCain and Obama, whoever wins, is going to have some tough choices on the international front. I'm wondering what your thoughts are about how we shore up our military, whatever you take that to mean, given that we're obviously stretched around the world. If something were to happen today, God forbid, in some other place of the world – I don't know; you know better than I do. I don't know what we would do, but what's your advice to the next president – your thoughts about what we do to shore up the military.

MULLEN: Well, we've got the best military. I've been doing this for 40-plus years – a long time. It's the best military I've ever been associated with: 2.2 million active and reserve and guard from all services and they are absolutely spectacular. They've gone on mission after mission and they've been very, very tough – great sacrifices. Those who've fallen and their families have sacrificed – that's the ultimate sacrifice. The families – the individuals who've been wounded and those who've, again, given so much.

It's the most combat harden force that we've ever had in the history of our country. We've got to work hard to make sure that we keep that core of young, combat hardened individuals. Because I think if we do that, we put ourselves in a position to be in good shape for a long period of time.

We've converted from a conventional force. I mean, we've really focused on counterinsurgency. I think we've got to broaden our training and readiness with respect to full spectrum capability, put in balance both the counterinsurgency requirement, which is very much in evidence in Iraq and Afghanistan, and at the same time make sure that we continue to focus on these other areas when we get a chance.

The other thing I've got to do is start to build some dwell time. These deployments are a year in length, typically. They're only back for a year and they've done this multiple times. We've got to get to a point where we have more breathing space in between deployments. So that's another area that's going to really be important and that's tied to the commitments that we have, the size

of our forces, and we're growing the army and the Marine Corps as we should. We stopped a decline in the end strength in our Air Force and the Navy is pretty much settled out. So it is along those lines – it's along what I would call a balanced investment. We'll have a – and we do constantly have this debate about how much we should invest in our national security. And I recognize there are other challenges in our country that not the least which are Social Security and Medicaid and Medicare. I mean, there are huge economic and fiscal challenges that we have.

I've argued for about a 4 percent floor of our gross domestic product to invest in national security given the conditions that I see that put there and that are very daunting. And in fact, you said we've got challenges in other parts of the world just from a military standpoint, but it's not all about military anymore because I think our government has to – other agencies in our government – we've got to work more with them to engage around the world, and that's become very evident in these two wars that we've fought.

SMILEY: Admiral, I know you've got a busy schedule, a lot on your plate, but I appreciate taking time coming to see us.

MULLEN: Thanks, Tavis. Thanks a lot.